Cal Lane
FABRICATE

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Cal Lane: Fabricate
April 27 – July 28, 2002
AGNS Emerging Artist Series
Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court (36)

Curator:
Ray Cronin, Curator of Contemporary Art

Printed in Canada
© 2002 Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
ISBN: 0-88871-743-1

Published by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
PO Box 2262
1723 Hollis Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 3C8
www.agns.gov.ns.ca

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Photography: Semaphor Design, Fraser Ross
Design: Semaphor Design
Printing: Bounty Print Ltd.

The exhibition was made possible with support received from The Canada Council for the Arts

The Canada Council for the Arts
Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

Art Gallery *of* Nova Scotia

The Artist

Cal Lane was born in Halifax and raised on Vancouver Island. She is a certified welder, and earned a diploma in Fine Art from the Victoria College of Art in 1995. She is also a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (2001). In 2001 she was a winner of the International Sculpture Centre's Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award. She serves on the board of directors of Eye Level Gallery and has taught at NSCAD. Lane has had solo or group exhibitions in Halifax, Victoria, La Have NS, and Hamilton, New Jersey. From April – July 2002 she was Artist-in-Residence at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. She lives in Enfield, NS.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Gerald Ferguson, Merv Russell, the Halifax Port Authority, the Welding Warehouse, Sandy Graham, John Kennedy, Zeke Moores, Don Miller, Leah Garnet, Brian Faubert, Brandon Vickard, Ray Peterson, Ray Cronin and the rest of the staff at the AGNS.

Cal Lane

Director's Foreword

On May 14, 1993, the Ondaatje Court was formally dedicated through the philanthropy of Christopher Ondaatje. It has been our intention and Mr. Ondaatje's hope that the Court would become a gathering place for our citizens and visitors. Mr. Ondaatje commented at the dedication ceremony... "It is my sincere hope that the Court will be used not only as an exhibition area for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, but also as a forum for the development of learning and international understanding."

Prior to this, in July 1991, the *Bird of Spring* by Abraham Etungat was installed, courtesy of the City of Halifax. In 1995, after a national sculpture competition and during the G7 Summit, John Greer's *Origins* was installed. Since that time, the Ondaatje Court has indeed become a "gathering place" and has been an integral part of the AGNS experience.

It is with great pleasure that we present *Cal Lane: Fabricate*. This exhibition marks the opening of our 36th temporary exhibition space, the Sculpture Gallery, and continues our Emerging Artists Series – an important mainstay of our contemporary programming that showcases the work of young and upcoming Nova Scotian artists. *Cal Lane: Fabricate* continues the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's commitment to sculpture and enhances the two sculpture exhibitions currently on view in our Education Gallery MTT, an Aliant company Gallery (2) and the Central Guaranty Trust Gallery (1).

The Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court complements our permanent sculptural installations, and provides an important public venue for sculpture in Halifax and for the Province of Nova Scotia. Two exhibitions will be presented annually on the Ondaatje Court.

We are also delighted that Cal Lane will be our artist-in-residence this spring, and will provide Gallery visitors with the opportunity to visit her in the studio and learn more about this exhibition of her work. This interaction between our exhibitions and artist-in-residence program is very important.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Ray Cronin, Curator of Contemporary Art, and all AGNS staff who assisted in making this exhibition a reality, through their hard work and dedication in fulfilling our mission of bringing art and people together. Thank you to The Canada Council for the Arts for their continued vision and support.

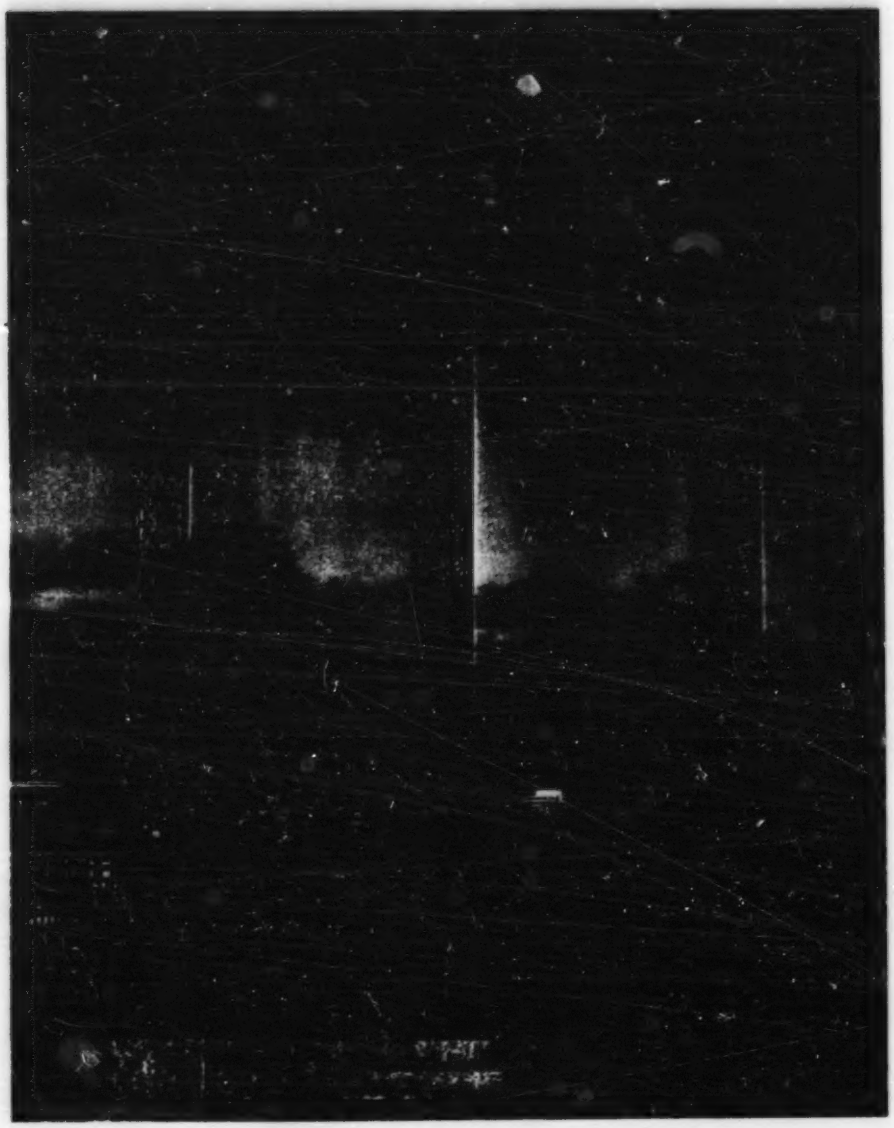
Enjoy spring in the Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court with *Cal Lane: Fabricate*!

With good wishes.
Bernard Riordon
Director

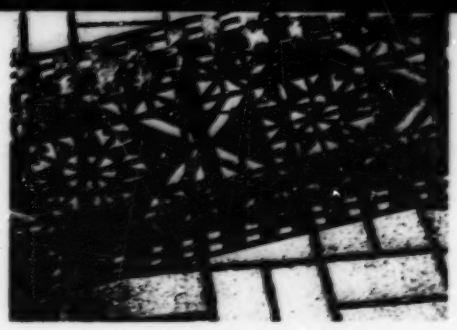
Cal Lane
FABRICATE

Cal Lane's exhibition of nine steel sculptures, the first exhibition in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's newly designated Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court, moves art from within the specialized spaces of an art gallery out into the public sphere. Because of their immediate familiarity, these works convey a certain accessibility – they are graspable at a glance, at least in a cursory manner. As the viewer recognizes the steel beams as being akin to lace ribbons, doors open for further readings as the complexity and beauty of these deceptively simple works unfold. Once one gets past that sense of recognition, *Fabricate* raises so many interesting issues that it is hard to know where to begin discussing the works. It's as if the sculptures bring many related ideas into focus, the sheer weight of their presence pulling concepts into their orbit.

I could start by talking about architecture. The monumental scale of these sculptures (ranging from 3.5 to 7 metres long), Lane's chosen material (I-beams, the skeletal structure of modern architecture), and context (in a public plaza in the heart of Halifax's downtown core) situate this work within the ongoing discourse on architecture and the public face of our cities. That her work is placed beside a stone Victorian building, one graced with complicated and unabashedly ornamental carving, including filigree mirrored in Lane's own cut work, just strengthens that reading. By cutting into the beams, reproducing the patterns of lace, Lane seems to be pointing out the limits of Modernity's asceticism. In this reading the lace patterns



Installation of *Fabricate*, the Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court

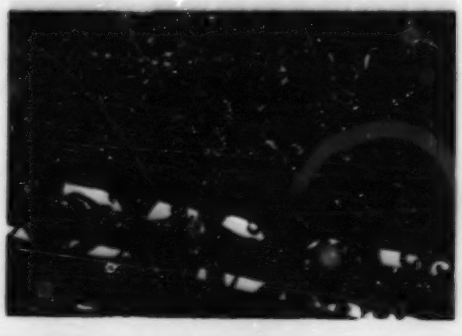


work as ornament, a decorative function that also undermines the structural integrity of the beams. Is Lane then suggesting subversion of the modern, or of the decorative? Is ornament eating away at the modernist purity of the towers? In this reading I suggest that the decorative is indeed a corrosive. Ornament eating away at the unrealistic, almost inhuman, aspects of Modernity (the architectural style of Brutalism is a good example – the Brutalist tenet of truth to materials and honesty towards function is laudable, but too often the buildings seem constructed despite the people who have to live or work in them...). This type of purity too often leaves its viewer longing for some impurity, the irritant that can become a pearl. Lane's interest in ornament as cutting away at structure is apparent in another of her works, *Flying Buttresses* (2000), which feature steel beams cut to sit between wall and floor like interior buttresses. And like the buttresses of a Gothic cathedral, these are ornamented, though it is by cutting rather than by adding material, creating a sense of the heavy steel as a ribbon while also suggesting that the structural integrity might somehow be compromised.

The subject could be art itself, because the plaza in question is part of an art gallery, placing Lane's sculpture in the context of so-called "high" art. Her use of lace as a motif then demands to be read as part of the ongoing conversation around the use of domestic crafts in fine art – a conversation carried on in the 1960s and 1970s by Feminist artists such as Joyce Wieland and Judy Chicago. Lace, with its dual use as domestic ornament for furniture and as decorative feature of clothing, inhabits both the home and the public sphere. Lane is adding lace trim to the gallery, adding a domestic touch to the gallery's public face. This "dressing up" the gallery can be seen as a Feminist subversion of a powerful site, an intervention into the dominant discourse. A subtext to this conversation is the debate of "high" versus "low" arts, the distinction between "crafts" and "art," and the relative merit attached to work that has been primarily practiced by women. As much as Modernism attacked the hierarchies of the academy, it left in place the hierarchical structure that determined the relative merit of various disciplines, and the sexist structure that devalued work by women. Additionally, Lane's work evokes debates that have raged within sculpture surrounding the proper materials and subject matter for the medium. Steel, after all, is a relatively recent addition to the tradition, textiles even more so, and until recent times both materials would have been excluded from consideration as fine art.

There is the issue of class, as needlework is infused with histories of class conflict. Once a proto-industrial practice taken at par with painting and sculpture,[1] needlework was relegated to the decorative arts by the Renaissance, there to remain until the latter half of the 20th century when fine artists began to use it as a medium. In Victorian times needlework was the purview of middle and upper class women, "busy" work that was used to beautify the home and to keep women occupied. Idle hands, after all, were the devil's playthings. Needlework remains a popular hobby, primarily (still) among women, but it is also an industry, one whose laborers are almost uniformly exploited – sweatshops didn't fade with the industrial revolution, nor are they only found in faraway places.

And then there is the factory, and the idea of industrial fabrication versus artistic creation. Lane's use of huge steel beams and oxy-acetylene cutting torches perhaps points to the factory more than the studio, but her insistence on cutting the beams herself and her reliance on a technology that, for this purpose, is outmoded, refocuses the work on the studio. These towers are not efficient, for instance. They could have been fabricated using other industrial techniques that would have been both faster and more economical, but which would have meant relying on machines for the finished product. Instead, Lane drew the patterns freehand, cutting as she went. The evidence of her process is visible in the work – in the way that the patterns meander slightly down the length of the beams, in the rough edges left by the oxygenated blast of the torch, and in the myriad, aesthetic, decisions the artist made in the long process of creating these pieces.



Or, I could talk about Cal Lane, because there is always the option of seeing this, or any artwork, as rooted in the artist's biography and self-identity.

Lane, has had a varied working career, including as a hairdresser, veterinary nurse and as a welder, and she mines her experience in works such as *Curled Steel* (1999), *Mechanic with Doily* (1999), *Hopscotch* (2000) and her ongoing *Doilies* series. In *Curled Steel*, for instance, Lane used heat to bend a wave pattern into steel flat stock, then added pink hair-curlers to the bar, creating the suggestion that the pink plastic curlers had bent the steel. *Hopscotch*, a playful work made from steel plate, references both the childhood game of the title and American sculptor Carl Andre's famous "Carpet" sculptures. The modernist obsession with progress replayed as a child's game – a neat summation of how the history of the art from the last century can look from the other side of modernism. The *Doilies*, on the other hand, began as a humorous take on a version of femininity that she had little affinity with. Her first effort was a flame cut steel doily based on a made-up pattern. In a neat twist, the mother of the person who bought the sculpture created a crochet pattern based on Lane's design, eventually giving the artist a lace doily in that pattern.[2]

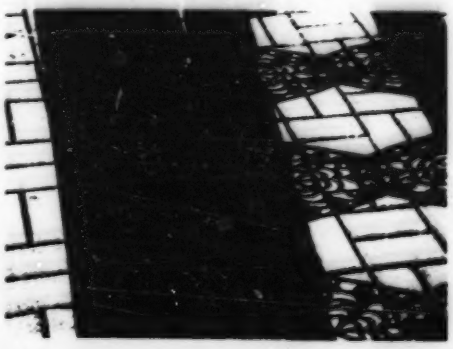
All of these possible readings do not mean that Lane's work is elaborately layered with references illustrating various theories. Instead, the complexity of *Fabricate* derives from its elegance – its power from its simplicity. To paraphrase Constantin Brancusi, you arrive at simplicity through the heart of the matter.[3] Because these works are so rich, they can stand up to many different analyses – none of which exhausts the conceptual potential of these works. The towers of *Fabricate* are open both in form and in content – and open works, as Umberto Eco points out, can't be consumed by the readings of viewers, are not closed systems designed to support a single point of view.[4]

So I'm back to the question of where to begin. I'll answer, as Lane does, with sculpture.

The so-called "high" arts, including sculpture, have undergone a state of near-perpetual revolution since the early days of the last century. In a manner of speaking, Auguste Rodin was the last sculptor, while his near contemporary and erstwhile student, Constantin Brancusi, was the first. In the waning days of the 19th and dawn of the 20th centuries, the figurative tradition in sculpture was eclipsed by Modernism. Influenced by the changes being wrought in painting, sculpture went further than any other "high" art in remaking itself – rejecting the tradition it had inherited from the Renaissance. Sculpture was reborn in the years before the First World War, and it had at least three midwives at its rebirth: Brancusi, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp.

Picasso's use of collage and his application of painting's genre subjects to three-dimensions helped free sculpture from its reliance on the figure and introduced the concept of construction as a sculptural process. Until Picasso's experiments sculpture was basically about modelling or carving. Picasso's work with Julio Gonzalez, in particular, introduced a whole new medium to sculptors: welded steel, a quintessentially Modern approach, using new advances in industrial technology. Marcel Duchamp's revolutionary "ready-mades" paved the way for freeing sculpture, and all other art disciplines, from the necessity of making anything at all. Duchamp's concept of art by assignation (something, anything, is art because an artist says it is...) was art at its most conceptual, a gesture that, at the time, seemed powerful enough to topple art from its pedestal forever. Finally, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi incorporated that pedestal into sculpture, injecting sculpture into the same space as the viewer, doing away with the framing that put the art into a kind of "virtual" space. As importantly, Brancusi perfected the truth to materials ethos that has been one of the strongest strains in sculpture ever since.

When modernist sculpture embraced the factory, most notably with the work of David Smith, it opened up a whole new way of working for sculptors. Fabricating one's own work became a mark of honour for sculptors, who saw themselves as workers as opposed to aesthetes, until the sheer monumentality of steel sculpture in the 60s and 70s made that ideal impracticable for many artists.[5]



Postmodernism was ushered in on the wave of 1960s Feminism. Perhaps the first sign of the coming change was the use of textiles in sculpture by artists such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor. Their work was followed quickly

by the insistence by artists such as Joyce Wieland that traditional "women's" work, such as embroidery and quilting, be recognized as possible media for "high" art[6]. This interest in "hand" work roughly paralleled the rise of Minimalism, practitioners of which were busily denuding their artworks of any sign of the artist's touch, of any expressive content at all. Concurrently, Conceptualism tried to rationalize art, to dematerialize it into pure idea. It's fallen to a new generation of artists to fully embrace the tactility and beauty possible in the sculptural use of needlework. For all of the artists who now use embroidery, rug hooking, knitting, weaving and sewing as techniques for art destined for the gallery, women's handwork retains its history of exclusion. That history is, of course, what lends the new sculpture by artists such as Janet Morton, Barbara Hunt and Catherine Heard its power. Lane references textiles without actually working with them, affirming the successful subversion of the sculptural tradition, using domestic handwork as a suitable subject for monumental steel sculpture.

Flame-cutting steel is a laborious process, doing so on the scale that Lane has chosen shows a remarkable commitment to the process of making. That commitment to work is a hallmark of much new sculpture, a reaction, perhaps, to the sculpture of the 80s and 90s, much of which was industrially fabricated to the artists' specification. It is also an economic reality for younger artists who can only afford their own labour. That laboriousness is another connection with the handwork referenced in Lane's sculptures. Lace making is painstaking, time consuming work, work that, if it is valued at all, is usually undervalued. Cheap mass-produced replicas have flooded the market and there is little appreciation for the real thing – a seemingly ubiquitous attitude in our consumer culture.

Lane's sculptures can be read as monuments and as reproaches, as assertive battle cry or subtle analysis, as raw and as refined. These works are reductive, more akin to carving than the more common constructive, additive, use of steel in Western sculpture, but they retain the allusion to the processes of needlework. Their aggressive verticality renders them sign-like, scrolls waiting to be deciphered. The absences that make their patterns open them up to the world, dematerializing the works even while adding the weight of history, context and conjecture. These works are the result of present day alchemy – fire turning steel into air, the artist turning work, material and place into idea.

Ray Cronin
AGNS Curator of Contemporary Art

1 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Chapter 2. *Eternalising the Feminine*

2 Artist talk at the Khyber Club, Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax, Spring 2002

3 "Simplicity is not an end in art, but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves as we approach the real sense of things." Constantin Brancusi, quoted in Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture*. Hacker Art Books: New York, 1967. page 145

4 See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*. Trans. Ana Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989

5 This process is well documented in Denise Leclerc's essay *From Studio to Factory*, in *Robert Murray: The Factory as Studio*. National Gallery of Canada: Ottawa, 1999

6 Women artists used needlework techniques in early Modern work as well, particularly those associated with the Bauhaus and the Russian Constructivist movements, but while Sonia Delauney and Liubov Popova, for example, used the so-called domestic crafts, they did so in imitation of the prevalent painting of the day. See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, Chapter 8: *A Naturally Revolutionary Art?*

List of Works

All works Collection of the Artist

1. *Pattern 22*
   flame cut steel
   701.0 x 30.5 x 12.7 cm

2. *Dekani*
   flame cut steel
   448.0 x 37.5 x 13.3 cm

3. *Plaits and Picots*
   flame cut steel
   693.4 x 43.2 x 15.2 cm

4. *Pricket*
   flame cut steel
   393.7 x 32.4 x 13.3 cm

5. *Rose Garden*
   flame cut steel
   482.6 x 61.0 x 53.3 cm

6. *Needlepoint Border*
   flame cut steel
   477.5 x 38.1 x 14.0 cm

7. *Forget-me-nots*
   flame cut steel
   536.0 x 30.5 x 12.7 cm

8. *Bobbin Lace #1*
   flame cut steel
   502.9 x 33.0 x 17.8 cm

9. *Bobbin Lace #2*
   flame cut steel
   490.2 x 43.2 x 15.2 cm

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